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Explaining Latin American Migration, 1960-2024: An Empirical Application of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

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Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate the usefulness of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach at explaining migration. For this, the author introduces a multiple regression model whose independent variables include indices from the V-Dem project tapping such capabilities. These capabilities are complemented with two dimensions taken from Mathias Czaika & Constantin Reinprecht's Taxonomy (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). The outcome variable is Latin American net migration. Migration is conceived as part of broader processes of social transformation and development, which affect the migratory phenomenon through their social, economic, cultural, demographic and political advances (de-Haas, 2021). Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities captures these broader processes of social transformation and development, as it includes not only the abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment.

Keywords: Nussbaum's Capabilities, Sen's Capability, Latin American migration, V-Dem project

Introduction

Since about 2015, intense media and public attention in the USA have been focusing on surging migration of Central American families alone and unaccompanied minors, as well as mixed migration in caravans. However, the big influx of Central American immigrants and other Latin American countries began to make their way to the U.S. in the early 1980s, coinciding with the conflict between U.S.-backed militaries and the guerilla groups (Abrego & Menjivar, 2022). The case is that by 2021, "new arrivals joined the approximately 3.8 million Central American immigrants already residing in the United States" (Ward & Batalova, 2023). About 86 percent of them came from Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA that includes Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) and Nicaragua, as follows: 40 percent were from El Salvador, 32 percent from Guatemala, 21 percent from Honduras, and 7 percent from Nicaragua (Mejía-Mantilla & González-Rubio, 2024). Lately, however, people from Venezuela, the Caribbean, Colombia, Ecuador, and Perú have also headed to the north (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). For example, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encounters of Venezuelan migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border increased rapidly from 1,311 in 2020 to 179,899 in 2024, representing an increase of about 52% (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025). Regarding the Caribbean, in 2020, a total of 4,116 Haitians were captured by CBP officers. By 2024 that number went up to 78,121 (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025), representing an unusual increase of 1798%. In the same year, 14,772

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Cubans were encountered by CBP agents, while in 2024, that number went up to 131,494 (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025), representing an increase of 790%. Similarly, in 2020, CBP encountered 406 Colombians at the US-Mexico border; this number went up to 97,115 in 2024 (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025), representing an unusual increase of 23,820%. Likewise, the number of Ecuadorians that CBP encountered at the US-Mexico border in 2020 was 16,594. It went up to 87,734 in 2024 (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025), representing an increase of 429%. Finally, regarding Perú, CBP apprehended 374 Peruvians at the US-Mexico border in 2020; this number was elevated to 25,028 in 2024 (US-Customs-Border-Protection -CBP-, 2025). This difference represented a 6,592% increase. Mexicans, although in decreasing numbers, still represent the largest number of migrants from Latin America to the USA. In sum, the Latin American migrants heading to the north have dramatically increased in the last couple of years.

This paper aims to explain this migration stream as part of broader processes of social change and development, which, according to de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas, Castles, and Miller (2020), affect the migratory phenomenon through their social, economic, cultural, demographic and political advances. The assumption is that Martha Nussbaum's *Capabilities* delineated in her book *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011), captures, to a large extent, these broader processes of social transformation and development, as it includes not only the abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment as theorized by de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas, Castles, and Miller (2020). Specifically, Nussbaum lists ten most central capabilities: *Life; bodily healthy; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment* that (1) she argues are the threshold requirements for a life of human dignity, and (2) they explain people's well-being and a dignified human life (Harvard University Press, 2011). The author complements Nussbaum's approach with other three capabilities. Two of them, *Economic Capability* and *Politico-institutional Capability*, were taken from Czaika & Constantin Reinprecht's Taxonomy (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022, p. 56), and the third one, *Quality of Life*, is a contribution by the author. A full explanation of these capabilities is included in the methodological section. To evaluate Nussbaum's Capability Approach, the author uses ten Latin American countries that according to journalist reports are the nations from which immigrants in the USA mostly come from. The analysis covers net migration from 1960 to 2024. The independent variables were selected from Coppedge *et al's* (2024) democracy project, the *V-Dem project* or simply *V-Dem* (varieties of democracies) that provides a multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that reflects the complexity of the concept of democracy as a system of rule (Coppedge, et al., 2024).

With these two instruments (indices of *V-Dem* and the thirteen capabilities), the author introduces a *multiple regression model* whose outcome variable is *net migration* of each of the ten Latin American countries included in the analysis. The general hypothesis is that these indicators affect one way or another Latin American net migration.



Literature Review

A. Sen's Capability Approach (CA) vs Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (CsA)

Amartya Sen introduced his *CA* in his lecture “*Equality of What?*” Delivered at Stanford University in 1979 (Sen A. , 1979). It was further developed and refined either by Sen himself (1985; 1999; 1992) or by others, particularly Martha Nussbaum (2011). *CA* is a moral-philosophical paradigm focusing on the quality of life that people can achieve. This quality of life is analyzed in terms of three concepts: ‘functionings,’ ‘capabilities,’ and ‘agency.’ *Functionings* are the states and activities constitutive of a person's beings (and doings), e.g., being healthy, being well-nurtured, having shelter, having a good job, and being safe, as well as more complex states, such as being happy, having self-respect, and being calm (cumulus of actual achievements). In Sen's (1999) approach, *capabilities* are the set of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to and achieve them. “Thus, a person's capability represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different functioning combinations – between different kinds of life – that she has reason to value” (Wells, ?), including emigration in this case. *Agency* is related to “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (GOODPAL, 2018), e.g., participating in a protesting march for immigration reform. This is to say, “agency is about people's interactive role in the society” (GOODPAL, 2018), like freely participating in economic, social, cultural, and political activities. In this sense, migration is conceived as one of the *functionings* (or goods of great value for him/her) that the potential migrant can get (*capability*), that is, s/he counts on the means-abilities to get it, and s/he has the freedom to choose it (*agency*). For this latter, the system should give him/her the institutional support to exercise it.

Building on *CA*, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (*CsA*) focuses on four aspects: First, it tries to answer the question “What is each person *able to do* and *to be*?” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). This is about opportunities the people may have to choose and to act. In Sen's approach, this is equivalent to a set of valuable functionings that a person has *effective access* to and *achieve them*, or substantial freedoms. Second, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach “*focuses on choice of freedom*, holding that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities [in Sen' approach: they are the valuable functionings that a person has effective access to], or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). Third, *CsA* is “*pluralist about value*. It holds that the capability achievement that are central for people are different in quality, not just in quantity” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). For example, protected freedom of speech is different for each person in a group, even though that freedom may be central for all people in that group. Finally, her approach is *concerned with entrenched social injustice and inequality*, especially capability failures that are the result of discrimination or marginalization” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 19).

Thus, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is a kind of freedom to *freely* achieve different functionings or opportunities that have value for the people and that they can choose and act. “They are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 20). Then, Nussbaum divides the capabilities into two groups: *internal-basic* and *combined capabilities*. The former are the innate abilities of the person that s/he can develop (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21). An example is a person's learned political skills. *Combined capabilities* are the total opportunities that a person has for choice and action in his/her specific sociopolitical and economic environment. Based on this conceptualization,

Professor Nussbaum (2011) framed the functionings and capabilities in terms of the previously mentioned then abilities.

In general, Nussbaum's approach focuses more on these capabilities understood as opportunities and freedoms people have than on functionings or what people achieve. Why is this? Alkire (2005) answers this question by indicating that poor people simply want to avoid extreme discomfort and deprivation more than the freedom to avoid extreme discomfort and deprivation. Second, in Nussbaum's notion of capabilities, people's skills and personality traits are emphasized. For this reason, attention is paid to thoughts, emotions, meaning, and action (Gasper & Staveren, 2003). All this is reflected in people's wellbeing, happiness, and participation in socio-cultural, economic and political affairs.

In sum, Nussbaum (2011) presents her capabilities as a framework for understanding and promoting human development and social justice for attaining human flourishing and living a life with dignity, freedom, and well-being. This way, the person builds his/her own "good" destiny, that is, the person can build the life that s/he has reason to value. The assumption is that migration is part of such a destiny.

B. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach Applied to Migration

First, based on de-Haas's aspirations and capabilities approach presented in his article, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations Capabilities Framework," this paper conceptualizes migration as part of broader processes of social transformation and development, which, according to de-Haas, affect the migratory phenomenon through their social, economic, cultural, demographic and political advances (de-Haas, 2021; de-Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020).

Second, with the development of these broader processes of social change, people get empowered with capabilities to migrate or decide to do or be something else that they have reason to value. Migration may be one of those elements that they have reason to value, and not an automated and passive *cause-and-effect* phenomenon responding to a set of static push and pull factors (de-Haas, 2021, p. 2). It is a product of broader processes of development, as we have been maintaining all through this paper.

Third, Nussbaum's *Capabilities Approach (C&A)* embraces not only the abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment as theorized by de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas, Castles, and Miller (2020). This combination is entrenched into the thirteen capabilities previously mentioned.

Fourth, the *ability to migrate* denotes the individual's abilities to make his/her journey happen. This is what Nussbaum calls *the combined capabilities*. Such abilities come in the form of socioeconomic, cultural and social advances that equip the individual with tangible means to migrate. In this regard, migration scholars maintain that "income growth, improved education, and improved communication and transport increase people's capabilities to migrate..." (de-Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020). In a similar venue, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) argue that migration decision is a function of *complex driver environments*, "a complex combination of economic, political, social, and other developments and events that may dynamically influence both migration opportunities as well as the willingness *and* ability to migrate" (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022, p. 55). Then, they developed a taxonomy consisting of nine *driver dimensions*



and twenty-four *driving factors* (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022, p. 56). An analysis of each of these driver dimensions and driving factors is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say here that the impact of these factors on migration depends upon their functionality. Such functionality takes place along the following key functions: *Predisposing* factors that “reflect fundamental societal structures and structural disparities and define the broadest, most fundamental layer of opportunity structures (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022, p. 54). The second function is *Proximate* drivers that, according to Czaika and Reinprecht, “downscale and localize predisposing macro-structural factors bringing them closer to the immediate ‘decision context’ of a potential migrant” (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022, p. 54). This is the set of capabilities from which the potential migrants may freely choose to make the journey possible (*agency* in Sen’s approach). Choosing or implementing the proper and corresponding options (capabilities) implies examination and disaggregation of all the presented capabilities to convert them into generating factors of migration, which will be the authentic reasons for migrating. These options or drivers of migration include unemployment, wage, income, job offer, marriage, persecution, and flooding.

In sum, our approach to migration, in this paper, combines Sen’s (1999) *agency* with Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities. Sen (1999) describes *agency* as the freedom to choose the functionings (doings and well beings) that the person value the most. This is to say, *agency* is related to “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.” Then, the actual achievement is determined by capabilities (Nussbaum’s capabilities) given context-specific obstacles and opportunities (Carling & Schewel, 2018), or factors in Czaika and Reinprecht’s (2022) taxonomy.

C. The Impact of Capabilities on Migration

In her article, Alpes (2012) found that the presence of a type of capabilities to migrate that she calls ‘the economy of migratory knowledge’ influence the people’s conviction that migration is meaningful and aspiring (desirable as a high level preferred value) regardless of difficulties of all type. By ‘the economy of migratory knowledge,’ Alpes means “cultural and societal factors that structure flows of information and influence constructions of meaning” (Alpes, 2012, p. 93). However, Alpes argues that “despite high aspiration for migration, levels of capability to realize such ambition are strikingly low for many young Anglophone Cameroonians” (Alpes, 2012, p. 97). This means that the broader process of development that de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas and colleagues (2020) refer to is very low. In fact, Alpes argues that for this reason, about 80% of respondents said that they would like to fall bush (migrate), but only 29% had tried concrete ways to go abroad. In any case, we may conclude that the capabilities to migrate matter.

On their part, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022), after reviewing the current theories of migration, propose a taxonomy of 24 migration drivers, categorized into nine driver dimensions. This taxonomy consists of eight dimensions (capabilities in Nussbaum’s work) measured by twenty driving factors (independent variables). However, their impact depends upon their functionality. Such functionality takes place along the two key functions, *Predisposing* and *Proximate* drivers, as explained above. This is the set of capabilities from which the potential migrants may freely choose to make the journey possible (*agency* in Sen’s approach). Comparing Nussbaum’s capabilities with Czaika and Reinprecht’s Taxonomy, Nussbaum’s capabilities are the driver dimensions in Czaika and Reinprecht’s taxonomy, while driving

factors in the latter scholars' taxonomy are embedded in the *beings able to* of Nussbaum's capabilities.

On his part, de-Haas, while trying to advance migration theory, proposes a 'theory' that simultaneously accounts for structure and agency without discarding the important insights provided by both functionalist and historical- structural paradigms (de-Haas, 2021, pp. 8-9). At the end, what he proposes is not a real theory. It rather is a set of "concepts and analytical tools that help us build upon and bridge insights provided by existing theories –not only within but also *across* paradigms" (de-Haas, 2021, p. 9). Congruently, as presented earlier in this article, he conceptualizes migration as an "intrinsic part of broader processes of economic, political, cultural, technological and demographic change embodied in concepts such as social transformation, 'development' and globalization" (de-Haas, 2021, p. 12). As we have been arguing in this research work, we conceptualize migration as part of the broader processes that de-Haas refer to. The author maintains that Nussbaum's capabilities, complimented with Czaika & Reinprecht's (2022) dimensions and driving factors, cover these broader processes.

On their part, Czaika and Vothknecht (2014) conceptualize migration as a function of an individual's capabilities to migrate and capacity of aspiring to migrate. They focus on the latter. Their specific outcome variables are capabilities of aspiration and deferential in average aspiration gaps of future migrants and non-migrants. One of their relevant findings is that migrants with some migration experience have higher aspirations to migrate than non- or future migrants, because, according to the scholars, the migration experience itself increases aspirations. This is an effect that migration scholars call *Cumulative Causation* of migration (de-Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020). This is an important capability to complement those of Nussbaum and enrich de-Haas's (2021) broader process of transformation. The better way to measure this migration experience (cumulative causation) is via survey research, which will be analyzed in the *conclusion section* of this article.

Methodology

As previously stated, the purpose of this article is to empirically evaluate Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to explain the Latin American migration to the USA. For this purpose, the author introduces a *multiple regression model* whose independent variables include *V-Dem* indicators tapping Nussbaum's ten abilities that are complimented with three additional dimensions, of which two, *Economic elements* and *Politico-institutional components* were taken from Czaika and Reinprecht's (2022) taxonomy. Capability thirteen, *Quality of life*, is a contribution of the author. The outcome variable is net migration [(immigration – emigration) / 100]. To ease the analysis, the negative sign was changed to a positive one.

A. Capabilities

These are Nussbaum's capabilities,² complemented with the other three already mentioned.

Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

² Taken from Martha Nussbaum's *Human Rights and Human Capabilities* (Nussbaum, 2007)



Bodily health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

Bodily integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

Senses, imagination, and thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain. (level of education and civil liberties/rights).

Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve in their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).

Practical reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance).

Affiliation. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation and protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech). **(B)** Having the social bases of self-respect and no humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

Other species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

Control over one’s environment. (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life, and having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. **(B) Material.** Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reasons and getting into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Quality of life. Quality of life is defined by the WHO as “individuals’ perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation

to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (World Health Organization, 2012, p. 3).

Economic Capability. This is the economic dimension of development. It includes wealth (poverty), individual income, and the national production of goods and services that empower the people in general.

Politico-institutional Capability. This capability is about political institutions that empower the people for them to freely exercise their political rights and liberties.

B. Measurement of Capabilities

Based on the above conceptualization of capabilities, the author measured them as follows:

Life. *Life Expectancy* is used as indicator for the following reason: it tells us the average number of years of life a person who has attained a given age can expect to live and [its] estimates provide a reliable snapshot of population health and mortality” (CDC, 2023). Data come from Ortiz-Ospina & Roser (2024).

Bodily health. *Death rate, crude (per 1,000 people)* This is the reason: mortality rate is a key indicator of a population's health status, allowing comparisons between different regions, groups, or time periods, as well as for tracking the impact of interventions.

Bodily integrity. To measure this capability, the author uses these indicators: *Freedom of domestic movement (FDM)*, and *Physical violence index (PVI)*. This is the reasoning: *FDM* encompasses the ability to move freely within a country's borders, including the right to choose where to live and travel, and to leave and return to one's country” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 73; Guild & Groenendijk, 2009, p. 206). Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1). *PVI*, meanwhile, is “a measure developed by V-Dem to assess the state of physical integrity, or the extent to which citizens are safe from political killings and torture by the government or its agents, in different regions of the world” (Coppedge, et al., 2024).

Senses, imagination, and thought. To measure this capability, the author uses *Freedom of Expression Index (FEI)* (0 -1) and *Civil Liberties Index (CLI)*. Reasons: *FEI* “captures the extent to which people can voice their views, and the media can present different political perspectives” (V-Dem, 2025). This includes “the extent to which governments respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression” (V-Dem Staff, 2015). Score goes from 0 to 1 (none to perfect freedom of ex). *CLI* measures the extent to which individuals are free from government-imposed physical harm and unjust restrictions on private and political liberties. It is a composite index averaging scores on physical violence, political civil liberties, and private civil liberties. Democracy Index use a scale from 0 to 10, with ten representing the most liberties (Coppedge, et al., 2024).

Emotions. The instruments to measure this capability are *Civil society participation index (CSPI)* and *Freedom of association thick index (FAThI)*. These are the reasons: According to Coppedge et al. (2024), *CSPI* is best estimate of the extent to which major civil society organizations are routinely consulted by policymakers, how many people are involved in them, women can participate, and candidate nomination for the legislature within parties is decentralized or made through primaries. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most active). This indicator is complemented with *FAThI*, which “measures the extent to which parties, including opposition parties, are



allowed to form and to participate in elections, and to what extent are civil society organizations able to form and to operate freely” (Coppedge, et al., 2024). The scale is an interval from *low* to *high* (0-1).

Practical reason. The measure for this capability is *Human rights index* (HRI). HRI includes freedom of religion. V-Dem defines it as an indicator capturing “the extent to which people are free from government torture, political killings, and forced labor; they have property rights; and enjoy the freedoms of movement, **religion**, expression, and association. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 (most rights) (Coppedge, et al., 2024).

Affiliation. (A) For part *A*, the author used *Core civil society index* (CCSI) to measure part *A* of this capability. This index “combines information on the extent to which citizens are active in diverse organizations (forms of social interaction), which choose and influence policymakers. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most active) (Coppedge, et al., 2024). **(B)** For this portion of affiliation, these indices were used : (1) *Equality before the law and individual liberty index* (ELILI), *Equal access index* (EAI), and *Equal right protection index* (ERPI). According to the expert estimates and index by V-Dem, ELILI captures the extent to which laws are transparent and predictably enforced, public administration is impartial, and citizens enjoy access to justice, secure property rights, freedom from forced labor, freedom of movement, physical integrity rights, and freedom of religion. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most liberties) (Coppedge, et al., 2024). (2) the second indicator, EAI is the best estimate of the extent to which access to power is equal across socioeconomic position, social group, and gender; so, all social groups can influence and participate in policymaking. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most equal) (Coppedge, et al., 2024). The third indicator, ERPI, combines information to the extent to which the state grants and protects rights and freedoms equally across all social groups. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most equal) (Coppedge, et al., 2024).

Other species and **Play** were not used for lack of aggregate data.

Control over one’s environment (COE). Political. Based on the meaning of this part of COE, the indicators used to tap it are *Deliberative Democracy Index* (DDI), *Freedom of expression Index* (FEI), *Participatory democracy index* (PDI), and *Core Civil Society Index* (CCSI). The reasons are as follows: DDI combines information on voting rights, the freedom and fairness of elections, freedoms of association and expression, as well as the extent to which citizens and leaders discuss different views and seek the public good. Scale from 0 to 1 (most democratic). FEI “captures the extent to which people can voice their views, and the media can present different political perspectives” (V-Dem, 2025). This includes “the extent to which governments respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression” (V-Dem Staff, 2015). Score goes from 0 to 1 (none to perfect freedom of ex). PDI combines information on voting rights, the freedom and fairness of elections, freedoms of association and expression, as well as the extent to which citizens can engage in regional and local government, civil society organizations, and direct democracy. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic) (Coppedge, et al., 2024). Finally, CCSI is characterized by autonomous individuals and groups (outside the state, market, and family) that “freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, [while working together to shape public policy]” (GAIN- The Columbia Climate School, 2025). from 0 to 1. A higher score indicates a more robust and autonomous civil society. **Material.** To measure this section of COE, the author selected these indicators: *Proper Rights Index* (PRI) and *Equal Protection Index* (EPI). PRI

evaluates institutional strength and government effectiveness in protecting both physical and intellectual property rights (Property Rights Alliance, 2024). Regarding *EPI*, “based on the expert estimates and index by V-Dem, *EPI* combines information on the extent to which the state grants and protects rights and freedoms equally across all social groups. It ranges from 0 to 1 (most equal)” (Coppedge, et al., 2024). Data from: Human Progress (2025).

Quality of life (QoL). For this capability, the authors used *Human Rights Index (HRI)*. These are the reasons: *HRI*, according to V-Dem, captures the extent to which people are free from government torture, political killings, and forced labor; they have property rights; and enjoy the freedoms of movement, religion, expression, and association. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 (most rights). All these indicators provide good reasons to believe that a consequence of their observance is an excellent quality of life.

Economic Capability. The indicator used to measure this capability is the *GDP per capita (GDPC)*. The reasons are as follows: *GDPC* is a measure of a country's economic output per person, calculated by dividing the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by its mid-year population. It is often used to compare the standard of living and economic well-being of different countries (World Bank, 2025).

Politico-institutional Capability. To measure this capability, the author used these two indicators: *Freedom of expression index (FEI)*, *Exclusion by Political Group index (ExPGI)*, *Exclusion by Social Group index (ExSGI)*, and *Political civil liberties index (PCLI)*. First, *FEI* measures people's political rights and liberties as previously described. *ExPGI* “captures whether individuals are denied access to services or participation in governed spaces based on their identity or belonging to a particular group. The index consists of five sub-indicators, each of which ranges from 0 (worse) to 4 (better)” (Bederke, 2020). *ExSGI*, developed by V-Dem, measures the extent to which individuals are denied access to services or participation in governed spaces based on their social group identity (Coppedge, et al., 2024). Finally, according to Coppedge (2024), *PCLI* captures the extent to which people enjoy the freedoms of expression and association. The variables ranges from 0 to 1 (most liberties).

C. The Multiple Regression Model

The basic representation of MRM is this: $y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 X_{i2} + \dots + \beta_p X_{ip} + \varepsilon_i$, $i=1, \dots, n$ (1)

Where y_i is the i^{th} response (or outcome variable); β_0 is the constant term in the model, e.g., the value of y when X_{ij} equals zero; β_k is the k^{th} regression coefficient to be estimated (the amount of change in y for every unite of change in X_{ij}); X_{ij} is the i^{th} observation on the j^{th} predictor variable, $j = 1, \dots, p$; ε_i is the i^{th} noise term, that is, random error; and n is the number of observations (Agresti & Finlay, 1997, p. 383; Tacq, 1997, pp. 100-116). Then the migration prediction equation is this:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 X_{i2} + \dots + \beta_p X_{ip} \quad (2)$$

$$Migra = \beta_0 + \beta_1(LijEx) + \beta_2(CDR) + \beta_3(FDM) + \beta_4(PVI) + \beta_5(FEI) + \beta_6(CLI) + \beta_7(CSPI) + \beta_8(FATHI)$$

$$+ \beta_9(HRI) + \beta_{10}(CCSI) + \beta_{11}(ELILI) + \beta_{12}(EAI) + \beta_{13}(ERPI) + \beta_{14}(DDI) + \beta_{15}(PDI)$$

+



$$+ \beta_{16}(CCSI) + \beta_{17}(PRI) + \beta_{18}(EPI) + \beta_{19}(GDPC) + \beta_{20}(ExPGI) + \beta_{21}(ExSGI) + B_{22}(PCLI) + e$$

Where the variables in parentheses are as described in subsection III. B. *Measurement of Capabilities* in this article and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Variables Name, their Meaning, and Rang of Scale or Indices

These Variables:	Stand for:	Scale (Index) or Num.
Migra	Net migration of the 10 Latin American countries included in the analysis	Continues from zero...
LIFE		
<i>LifeEx</i>	Life expectancy at birth	Continues from zero....
BODILY HEALTH:		
CDR	Crude death rate	Number 0 to ...
BODILY INTEGRITY		
FDM	Freedom of domestic movement (could be negative association)	low to high (0-1)
PVI	Physical violence index	low to high (0-1)
SENSES/IMAG/TH		
FEI	Freedom of Expression Index (more freedom → less migration)	0 - 1 (perfect free)
<i>Civil Lib Ind</i>	Civil liberties index	low to high (0-1)
EMOTIONS:		
CSPI	Civil society participation index	0 - 1 (most active)
FAThI	Freedom of association thick index	low to high (0-1)
PRACTICAL REASON		
HRI	Humna Rights Index	0 - 1 (most rights)
AFFILIATION		
A. CCSI	Core civil society index	0 - 1 (most active)
B. ELILI	Equality before the law and individual liberty index	0 - 1 (most liberties)
EAI	Equal access index	0 - 1 (most equal)
ERPI	Equal right protection index	0 - 1 (most equal)
CONTROL OVER ONE'S ENVIRONMENT		
Political. DDI	Deliberative Democracy Index (as capability...+)	0 - 1 (most democratic)
FEI	Freedom of Expression Index (more freedom → less migration)	0 - 1 (perfect free)
PDI	Participatory democracy index (as capability...+)	0 - 1 (most democratic)
CCSI	Core Civil Society Index (as capability...+)	0 - 1 (most robust)
Material. PRI	Proper rights index	0 - 1 (most equal)
EPI	Equal Protection Index	0 - 1 (most equal)
QUALITY OF LIFE		
HRI	Humna Rights Index	0 - 1 (most rights)
ECO. CAPABILITY		
GDPC	Gross Domestic Product per capita	Absolute number
POLITICO-INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY		
FEI	Freedom of Expression Index (more freedom → less migration)	0 - 1 (perfect free)
ExPGI	Exclusion by Political Group index	0 - 4 (worse -better)
ExSGI	Exclusion by social group index	0 - 1 (most liberties)

PCLI	Political civil liberties index	0 - 1 (most liberties)
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Hypotheses:

1. The first expectation is that the relationship between this group of variables, *LifEx*, *CDR*, *FDM*, *PVI*, *FEI*, *CLI* and emigration (*Migra*) is positive, that is, for every unit of change (e.g., one percentage, a decimal between 0 and 1. Etc.) in each of these variables, emigration will increase by the corresponding β value.

Explanation 1:

Regarding *LifEx*, a larger number means empowerment or more strength in capability for the migrant to take the journey. In relation to *CDR*, larger number of people who die may encourage people to emigrate to a safer country (say the USA) or a country having a lower death rate. This is not a capability. *FDM* means capability (better equipment) for the potential migrants to definitively emigrate (freely move) to another country. Regarding *PVI*, a common argument that we hear from emigrants from Central America is that they run away from the violence prevailing in their countries. For this, we expect a positive relationship between *PVI* and migration rate. *FEI* and *CLI* are liberal freedoms, which, if regulated by constitutions, governments must recognize and protect. Usually, this is not the case in many Latin American countries. For this reason, people may be encouraged to take the journey. Thus, we expect a negative relationship: a decrement in these liberties may result in emigration.

2. The relationship of the following group of variables: *CSPI*, *FATbI*, *HRI*, *CCSI*, *ELILI*, *EAI*, *ERPI*, *DDI*, *PDI*, *CCSI*, *PRI*, and *EPI* with net migration (*Migra*) is negative, that is, for every unit of change (e.g., one percentage, a decimal between 0 and 1, etc.) in these variables, net migration (*Migra*) will decrease by the corresponding β value.

Explanation 2:

The variables in this set are all about civil liberties and civil rights. For this reason, good standing of each of them (e.g., an increase) will make people feel that (1) they are safe and officially protected at home and so (2) they may not feel the need to emigrate to another country, say the USA, in search of safety and security. This represents empowering the people by equipping them with protection of their liberties and rights. This capability is utilized to stay (no need to emigrate). For this reason, we should expect a negative relationship between these variables and net migration (*Migra*).

3. Regarding the variable tapping the “economic capability” category, the hypothesis is that as *GDPPC* goes up, emigration will increase. This represents economic capability or empowerment to emigrate.

4. Concerning the “Politico-Institutional Capability” variables, the hypotheses are as follows: being less excluded politically and socially (better situation), people may be encouraged to stay. Similarly, most political civil liberties denote people’s empowerment (capability) to stay (no need to leave). These are negative relationships with net migration. If people does not feel excluded from being part of a social or political group, they may feel better staying home as compared to emigrating. Similarly, protection of and respect for political civil liberties empower the people to stay. These improvements mean less emigration.



In sum, whether in a positive or negative form, the variables included in these four sets of hypotheses, tapping Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities and Czaika and Reinprecht's (2022) taxonomy, have something to do with net migration.

Analysis of Results

Table 2 presents the SPSS output of the multiple regression analysis.

Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis on Nussbaum's Capabilities					
<i>Model</i>	<i>Unstandardized Coefficients</i>		<i>Standardized Coefficients</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
<i>(Constant)</i>	2.795	4.373		.639	.523
<i>LIFE</i>					
<i>Life expectancy</i>	-.109	.054	-.238	-2.026	.043
<i>BODILY HEALTH</i>					
<i>Death rate, crude</i>	-.291	.103	-.27829	-2.838	.005
<i>BODILY INTEGRITY</i>					
<i>Freedom of dom. Mov't.</i>	5.879	1.020	.373	5.765	<.001
<i>Physical violence index</i>	3.450	1.957	.227	1.763	.078
<i>SENSES/IMAG/TH</i>					
<i>Freedom of expression index</i>	4.544	2.814	.342	1.615	.107
<i>Civil liberties index</i>	-4.266	4.614	-.266	-.924	.356
<i>EMOTIONS</i>					
<i>Civil society participation I.</i>	5.800	1.567	.332	3.702	<.001
<i>Freedom of association thick I</i>	.448	1.952	.034	.230	.819
<i>PRACTICAL REASON</i>					
<i>Human rights index</i>	3.181	7.256	.199	.438	.661
<i>AFFILIATION</i>					
<i>Equality before law Ind. Lib.</i>	-19.398	4.074	-1.198	-4.761	<.001
<i>Equal access index</i>	8.039	1.751	.439	4.591	<.001
<i>CONTROL OVER ONE'S ENV.</i>					
<i>Deliberative Democracy In.</i>	-4.603	2.830	-.219	-1.626	.104
<i>Participatory democracy In.</i>	2.971	4.135	.108	.719	.473
<i>Core Civil Society Index</i>	.118	.280	.016	.423	.673
<i>Proper Rights Index</i>	2.950	1.465	.194	2.013	.045
<i>QUALITY OF LIFE</i>					
<i>Human rights index</i>	3.181	7.256	.199	.438	.661
<i>ECONOMIC CAPABILITY</i>					
<i>GDP per capita</i>	-.170	.048	-.191	-3.518	<.001
<i>POLITICO-INST. CAPABILITY</i>					
<i>Exclusion by Political Group</i>	5.673	.796	.347	7.125	<.001
<i>Exclusion by Social Group</i>	4.704	1.465	.281	3.210	.001
<i>Political civil liberties index</i>	-.115	.366	-.013	-.312	.755
<i>Dependent Variable: Net migration. Adjusted R²= .308; F = 15.980, for a Sig. value = <.001.</i>					

First, our model, although explaining not a large variation (about 31%: Adjusted $R^2 = .308$) in net migration, does better than a model without independent variables, as our $F = 15.347$, for a Sig. value = $<.001$, which is $<.05$ (see bottom of Table 2).

Life. Regarding *Life*, the results are statistically significant (Sig. = $.043$), meaning that *life expectancy* has something to do with migration. The sign is not as expected. It is negative ($-.109$). This means that for every additional year of life, migration will decrease by 11 percent. This makes sense, because we may argue that as people become older, they may not be willing to emigrate (afraid of dying away from home?).

Bodily Health. *Crude death rate* (tapping *bodily health*) is negative, $-.291$ (not as expected) but statistically significant (Sig. = $.005$). This means that as the rate increases, emigration decreases by 29%. There is not a solid explanation for this result, except that higher level of *crude death rates* encourage people to stay home to take care of their loved ones, or they may think that there is a high death risk all along their journey starting inside their country of origin.

Bodily Integrity. Of the variables tapping *bodily integrity*, only one, *freedom of domestic movement*, was statistically significant (Sig. value = $<.001$) and with the expected sign (positive), meaning that for every unit of change in the index, about six people (5.79) will emigrate. We may think of *freedom of domestic movement* as a capability empowering potential migrants to take the journey.

Senses, imagination, and thought. Regarding the variables tapping *senses, imagination, and thought*, none of them was significant. This means that *senses, imagination, and thought* as described by Professor Nussbaum has nothing to do with net migration. However, it may be the case that the indicators used here to tap this capability are not actually measuring it properly. However, these indicators are the best ones we have found by now.

Emotions. Concerning the *emotions* capability, only the *civil society participation index* was statistically significant (Sig. value = $<.001$), but with unexpected sign. It is positive. We may interpret this result as a capability (empowerment) for the people to emigrate. The freer the people are to participate, the more inclined they are to emigrate. For every unit of increase in the *civil society participation index*, net emigration will increase by almost six people (5.800).

Practical Reason. The human rights index, tapping this capability, was not statistically significant. This means that this indicator has nothing to do with net migration.

Affiliation. In the case of the *affiliation* capability, the two indicators tapping it were significant, although only one of them (*equality before the law and individual liberty index*) with the expected sign (negative). For every increase in this index, about nineteen people decide to stay home. This is the reason: as people enjoy more liberties, they are less inclined to emigrate, because they may feel that they have the possible freedoms they may encounter in other countries, say the USA. Meanwhile, *equal access index* although significant (Sig. value = $<.001$), its sign was not as expected. As the level of access becomes evenly divided (representing increases), net migration will increase by eight (8.039) people.

Control Over One's Environment. Regarding this capability, only indicator, *proper rights index*, was significant (Sig. = $.045 < .05$). For every additional increase in this index, net migration will go up by three (2.950).

Quality Of Life. Regarding this capability, its indicator, human rights index, was not significant, as indicated previously.



Economic Capability. As expected, the variable *GDP per capita*, tapping this capability, was significant (Sig. value = <.001) but negative. This means that as the GDP per capita increases, representing empowerment for the people, they may not feel the need to go to another country in search of a better economic situation, as net migration decreases by 17 percent (-.170).

Politico-Institutional Capability. Interpreting the results of the two significant variables out of three, tapping this capability, we can conclude that being more accepted (included) for being a member of a political or social group encourages people to take the journey. For every unit of change in each of these two variables, *political* and *social group exclusions*, net migration increases by six (5.673) and four (4.704) people, respectively.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to empirically evaluate Nussbaum's Capability Approach to explain Latin American Migration usually to the USA. For this purpose, a multiple regression model was introduced. Eight capabilities were included, of which only six, via their indicators, were significant. This particularity makes us conclude, first, that Nussbaum's marvelous capabilities explain migration at least partially. In addition, two of the three additional capabilities included in the model have something to do with net migration too. Second, regarding the eight out of eleven capabilities included in the model, we may place them under four categories of integral development: "*physical life*," "*liberties-and civil rights*," "*spiritual life*," and "*economic dimensions*." As we see, these categories mostly cover what de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas, Castle, and Miller (2020) call broader processes of social change and development that, according to these scholars, such processes affect migration through their social, economic, cultural, demographic and political advances.

The first category, *Physical Life*, includes Nussbaum's capabilities *Life* and *Bodily Health*. Based on the results, our conclusion may be that better *life* and good *health* in countries of origin negatively affect emigration. This is to say, good life and health equip people to stay home.

The second category, *liberties-and civil rights*, includes: *Bodily Integrity*, *Affiliation*, and *Politico-institutional Capability*. By observing the results, we conclude that freedom of movement, equal access, and less exclusion for being part of political and social groups encourage people to emigrate, while equality before law and individual liberties encourage people to stay home.

The third category, *Spiritual Life*, includes *emotions*. Based on the results, we may argue that people's civil participation (a way to feed emotions) encourages them to emigrate.

The final category, *economic dimensions*, embraces *Economic Capability*. The results indicate that improving economic development encourages people to stay home. These results support one of the oldest arguments in the migration literature maintaining that the primary reason for people to take the journey is searching for a better economic situation.

In sum, as we see, Nussbaum's capabilities explain emigration by providing people with capabilities to both emigrate and stay home.

Caveats

First, two of Nussbaum's ten capabilities, *other species* and *play*, were not included for lack of indicators to tap them. This may limit the impact of Nussbaum's capabilities on net migration. Second, the ideal measure of the outcome variable is number of emigrants per year in this

case, but the author could not find such information. Net migration, however, gives us a good tendency.

Third, the author argues that the best way to accurately measure or tap Nussbaum's capabilities is via public opinion research. This would allow us to design suitable questions to accurately tap both the capabilities used here and other abilities that all together would fully cover the broader processes of social transformation and development that de-Haas (2021) and de-Haas, Castles, and Miller's (2020) refer to. In addition, the questionnaire would measure clearer our outcome variable.

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